

Message Text

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FM AMEMBASSY CANBERRA

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 2551

INFO AMMBASSY PHNOM PENH

S E C R E T CANBERRA 0894

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR, CN, BM, AS

SUBJ: AUSTRALIAN VIEWS ON CAMBODIA

REF: PHNOM PENH 1962

1. SUMMARY: AUSTRALIAN AMBASSADOR TO CAMBODIA, MARSHALL JOHNSTON, CONTINUES ON LEAVE AND CONSULTATIONS IN CANBERRA. CIRCUMSTANCES SUGGEST GOA IS CONSIDERING NOT RETURNING HIM TO CAMBODIA, BUT NO DECISION MADE AS YET. GOA HAS NO RPT NO INTENTION OF CLOSING ITS EMBASSY BUT MAY PRESS U.S. FOR OUR VIEWS ON FUTURE IN CAMBODIA, AT FORTHCOMING ANZUS COUNCIL MEETING. END SUMMARY.

2. IN COURSE OF DISCUSSION ON OTHER SUBJECTS FEB 14 LAURIE (ASSISTANT SECRETARY, MAINLAND BRANCH, DFA) NOTED THAT INDIAN AND BURMESE EMBASSIES IN PHNOM PENH HAVE RECENTLY BEEN CLOSED BUT ADDED THAT AUSTRALIA HAS NO RPT NO INTENTION OF CLOSING ITS EMBASSY. HE NOTED THAT AUSTRALIAN AMBASSADOR JOHNSTON HAS BEEN IN CANBERRA SINCE DECEMBER ON NORMAL LEAVE AND CONSULTATIONS, BUT ADMITTED THERE IS SOME QUESTION OF WHEN AND IF HE WILL RETURN. JOHNSTON HAS BEEN AT POST SOME 18 MONTHS AND MAY BE ASSIGNED TO OTHER DUTIES RATHER THAN RETURN PHNOM PENH.

3. LAURIE EXHIBITED SOME PERPLEXITY AS TO BEST COURSE

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TO ADOPT REGARDING CAMBODIA. HE NOTED THAT AT MOMENT, WITH RECENT ARTILLERY SHELLING OF PHNOM PENH, MAIN

AUSTRALIAN CONCERN IS WITH 23 AUSTRALIAN NATIONALS THERE (SEVEN FROM EMBASSY, OTHERS IN VARIOUS CAPACITIES). IF THEY FACE FUTURE OF PERIODIC SHELLING, WHICH COULD CAUSE CASUALTIES, IN ABSENCE OF COMPELLING AUSTRALIAN INTEREST IN CAMBODIA LAURIE SPECULATED THERE APPEARED TO BE NO GREAT PURPOSE IN KEEPING THEM THERE.

4. LAURIE SAID HE THOUGHT AUSTRALIA WOULD ASK U.S. AT ANZUS COUNCIL MEETING IN WELLINGTON FOR OUR VIEWS ON FUTURE IN CAMBODIA AND WHAT IS COMPELLING INTEREST WHICH KEEPS U.S. INVOLVED THERE. ACKNOWLEDGING THAT ANZUS COUNCIL IS PROBABLY AS GOOD A FORUM AS ANY FOR SUCH DISCUSSION, EMBOFF NOTED THAT OUTCOME IN CAMBODIA WOULD HAVE MAJOR EFFECT ON OUTCOME IN SOUTH VIET-NAM. LAURIE ARGUED THIS POINT AT SOME LENGTH, SPECULATING THAT FAILURE OF NORTH VIETNAMESE TO ORGANIZE TO SEIZE KOMPONG SOM PORT INDICATED THEY HAD NO GREAT INTEREST IN CAPTURING IT. HE FELT THAT CHANGE OF GOVERNMENT IN CAMBODIA MIGHT NOT NECESSARILY HAVE ANY SIGNIFICANT EFFECT ON SITUATION IN SOUTH VIET-MAN. HE EXHIBITED NOTABLY LOW OPINION OF QUALITY OF FANK, NOTING THAT RECENT SHELLING OF PHNOM PENH, ACCORDING TO AUSTRALIAN MILITARY ATTACHE, WAS RESULT OF FAILURE OF FANK TO CLOSE GAP OF SOME 1000 YARDS ON SOUTH SIDE OF PHNOM PENH, INTO WHICH KHMER ROUGE HAD INSERTED THREE ARTILLERY PIECES WHICH DID THE DAMAGE.

5. COMMENT: LAURIE SEEMED PARTICULARLY CAUTIOUS IN REFERRING TO FUTURE OF AMBASSADOR JOHNSTON (WHETHER TO RETURN TO POST OR TO BE ASSIGNED ELSEWHERE), INDICATING THAT THIS QUESTION WAS UP IN THE AIR AT A HIGH LEVEL. BELIEVE THERE MAY BE SOMETHING IN EMBASSY PHNOM PENH'S SPECULATION (REFTEL) THAT POLITICAL MOTIVE MAY UNDERLIE DELAY IN JOHNSTON'S RETURN TO PHNOM PENH, WITH AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT CONSIDERING LOWERING ITS PROFILE IN CAMBODIA A BIT FURTHER, BUT NOT GOING AS FAR AS BURMESE AND INDIANS IN CLOSING EMBASSIES. END COMMENT.

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